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ABSTRACT

In order for education to improve, it must undergo change implemented by teachers and administrators; directives from governing bodies will not accomplish much. The process for change could be based on the Japanese management model of redefining the corporate mission every few years with input from the employees. Schools need to listen to the educational expectations of their community and design their programs around those expectations. Performance and program evaluation could also be based on the Japanese model in which feedback is given by both the group and the supervisor. Such changes will take time and need to be carried out in an atmosphere where employees feel secure in trying new things. (DC)

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Upgrading School Quality

by Wesley L. Apker, executive director, Colorado Association of School Executives.

Education is a people business and it is big business. And like big business, if it is to be "improved" to meet higher or different standards of quality, it must undergo change. Either the people who teach and administer must conduct things differently or the people being taught must perform differently on whatever indicators are used to judge success. Certainly, there is a correlation between what teachers and administrators do and how students perform, but if we assume that the ability levels of our general student population are constant, any changes directed at improvement must be implemented by teachers and administrators.

Most people want to succeed; they want to perform well. How one teaches a class or administers a school evolves from one's view of self and others, one's academic training and wisdom gleaned from life experiences. Changing these patterns is not a simple task — for teachers, administrators, or, for that matter, anyone else. Behavior is most likely to change if the proposed change:

- Fits individual perceptions of what is important;
- Is backed by the resources to implement it;
- Does not threaten individual opportunities for personal or professional success; and
- Will be conducted in a "safe" working climate, one in which employees feel secure in trying new things.

A directive from a state legislature, state board of education, local board or superintendent to "improve the quality" of anything may make for interesting discussion, but it won't accomplish much. As we recognize the need to upgrade the quality of our schools, the question becomes, "How do we do it?"

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Redefining Our Mission

Those who have studied Japanese management are impressed with that nation's uniform employee understanding of and commitment to the corporate mission. But the Japanese corporate mission is not fixed; it is reviewed every five years or so and reshaped as society evolves and changes. And revised mission statements are not imposed upon employees before they have had an opportunity to review and comment on them.

The process of improving the quality of American education could be based on this Japanese model. Any superintendent and board determined to upgrade quality could begin by redefining the school district's mission in the context of a changed and changing society, new business, parent and political expectations and the movement from an industrial age to a technological, information era.

Defining Quality

The patrons of our schools are an amazingly diverse group. It should be no surprise that "quality" and the standards by which it will be judged vary not only among school districts, but among individuals as well. A superintendent and board who have not asked their p trons to reach consensus on "quality" will be hard-pressed to demonstrate quality effectively. Every school community should tell school leaders what they consider indicators of quality to be: test scores, satisfactory job entry skills, active community participation and so on. Then, administrators and teachers will be able to design programs aimed at meeting public expectations.

A directive to improve the quality of anything may make for interesting discussion, but it won't accomplish much.

A "successful" school district will be one that appears to be meeting expectations. A "successful" administrator will be one whose school or school district contributes to the agreed-upon mission. And "successful" teachers will have objectives that are part of a schoolwide, principal-coordinated commitment to common goals.

Evaluation

Individual performance and program evaluation in school districts often tend to be imprecise and sporadic. In contrast, performance evaluation in the Japanese managerial model focuses on the entire production unit, while individual performance feedback is given by both the group and the production unit head. Further up the ladder, corporate manager evaluation is performed by those answering to the manager and by the manager's supervisor.

We in education can learn from such a model. A superintendent could perform a data-based evaluation of the performance of an entire school as well as of the principal. When the principal is evaluated, faculty could be asked to participate. And principals would not only evaluate teacher performance, but, with the help of central office staff, peer teams and parent evaluation teams, could appraise the quality of instruction by grade level and subject area.

Common Sense, But . . .

We know there is growing citizen cynicism about the public schools. National Assessment of Educational Progress findings confirm that student performance levels in some areas have dropped. But research in the last few years points us toward some rather clear approaches to improving the effectiveness of the instruction in our schools. The improvement processes suggested here may be "common sense" solutions, but they cannot be applied overnight. Human behavior is not changed by edict. It changes over time through involvement, understanding and a perceived sense of self-enhancement. State policy makers and state and local policy implementors need to define missions, and create an atmosphere safe for change *before* improvement in education quality can occur. That will take time, commitment, money, and sometimes, the development of new school climates.★